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# Can We Reduce Bias in the Recruiting Process and Diversify Pools of Candidates by Using Different Types of Words in Job Descriptions?

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# Can We Reduce Bias in the Recruiting Process and Diversify Pools of Candidates by Using Different Types of Words in Job Descriptions?

## **Abstract**

Intuitively, we all know diversity matters in recruiting and leadership development. McKinsey research points out that companies in the top quartile for racial and ethnic diversity are 35% more likely to have financial returns above their respective national industry medians. Strategic diversity recruitment is a way to effectively send talent through the recruitment pipeline, but it is crucial to mitigate bias. A candidate's first interaction with employers is often through a job post that includes the job description and responsibilities. Without examining potential unconscious biases, job postings can include language that might deter a certain pool of candidates from applying, thus reducing the diversity of candidates. Through our research, we identified the beneficial use of gender fair language and flexible and inclusive wording in job advertisement and postings.

## **Keywords**

human resources, bias, recruiting, recruitment, diversity, inclusion, talent, attracting talent, unconscious bias, gender disparity, gender neutral, competitive salary, predictive analysis tools, diversity recruiting, diverse talent, disabilities, Asperger's, autism, culture

## **Comments**

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## Question & Introduction

*Can we reduce bias in the recruiting process and broaden/diversify pools of candidates by using different types of words/styles in job descriptions? If so, what words are most inclusive and resonate for different populations?*

Intuitively, we all know diversity matters in recruiting and leadership development. McKinsey research points out that companies in the top quartile for racial and ethnic diversity are 35% more likely to have financial returns above their respective national industry medians.<sup>1</sup> Strategic diversity recruitment is a way to effectively send talent through the recruitment pipeline, but it is crucial to mitigate bias. A candidate's first interaction with employers is often through a job post that includes the job description and responsibilities. Without examining potential unconscious biases, job postings can include language that might deter a certain pool of candidates from applying, thus reducing the diversity of candidates. Through our research, we identified the beneficial use of gender fair language and flexible and inclusive wording in job advertisement and postings.

## The Use of Language in Job Descriptions

### Gendered Language

Academic literature shows that language use in a job advertisement can unintentionally signal stereotypical gender biases and repel female applicants. Women tend to use a communal and interpersonal style of speech as compared to men, as well as more social and emotional language.<sup>2</sup> If a posting has more "masculine-themed" words women may perceive that they will not fit or belong to the culture. In industries that are male-dominated, such as technology and financial industries, there are many cases of using these male-skewed words and phrases in their job postings, causing female applicants to pass on those opportunities.

### Not So Gender-Neutral Language

Another common default of gender-biased wording that might initially seem gender neutral is using phrases such as *the best of the best*, which may lead females and minorities to think the company is looking for white males; *competitive salary* which might lead women to assume that there is no room for pay negotiation; or *ninja*, which is meant to signal for an aggressive candidate who has expertise in one field but is a very male skewed term.<sup>3</sup> Hiring managers need to balance male skewed wording with more gender friendly wording to ensure the job posting is gender neutral.<sup>4</sup>

### Qualifications Orientation

Women and minorities are also more likely to think that they must meet every requirement listed on a job description. Because of this inherent feeling, it is easy for recruiters to overlook job descriptions that might be written in a very exclusive manner that deters qualified candidates. Studies show that people usually do not want to waste time and energy applying for a position if they do not possess the required skills and experience outlined in the job qualifications.<sup>5</sup> Instead of stating "MA or Ph.D. required", companies can put "an advanced degree, preferably a doctorate." Similarly, "an MA degree with three years' work experience, or BA degree with five years' experience" can replace "an MA with three years' work experience required."<sup>6</sup>

### Examples<sup>7</sup>

#### **Engineer Company Description**

- Masculine: We are a *dominant* engineering firm that *boasts* many *leading* clients. We are *determined to stand* apart from the *competition*.
- Feminine: We are a *community* of engineers who have effective *relationships* with many *satisfied* clients. We are *committed to understanding* the engineer sector *intimately*.

## Engineer Qualifications

- Masculine: *Strong* communication and influencing skills. Ability to *perform individually* in a *competitive* environment. *Superior* ability to *satisfy* customers and *manage* company's association with them.
- Feminine: *Proficient* oral and written communications skills. Collaborates well in a *team* environment. *Sensitive* to clients' needs, can *develop warm client relationships*.

## Engineer Responsibilities

- Masculine: *Direct* project groups to *manage* project *progress* and *ensure* accurate task *control*. *Determine compliance* with client's *objectives*.
- Feminine: Provide general *support* to project team in a manner *complimentary* to the company. *Help* clients with construction *activities*.

There are now tools on the market that companies can use “spell-check” for gender bias. Several new start-ups, such as Textio, are using predictive analysis tools to code gender biased language and find the most effective words from its database (built from peer-reviewed academic research) to help neutralize job descriptions.<sup>8</sup> Below is a list of wording that we found from multiple research and resources:

List of masculine skewed wordings: *Ambition, driven, lead, persist, principle, decision, superior, individual, assertive, strong, active, hierarchical, rigid, Silicon Valley, stock options, strong, takes risk, workforce, autonomous, ping pong/pool table, must, competitive*<sup>3,9,10</sup>

List of feminine skewed wordings: *Thoughtful, creative, adaptable, choose, collaborate, curious, excellent, flexible, multitasking, health, imaginative, intuitive, leans in, plans for the future, resilient, self-aware, socially responsible, trustworthy, up-to-date, wellness program, nurture, teach, dependable, community, serving, understand, loyal, enthusiasm, trust, support, interpersonal, connect, commit*<sup>3,9,10</sup>

### What's Next? – Diversity Recruiting Strategies and Supporting Systems

While following these rules certainly helps companies receive more applications from diverse talent, a supporting system for diversity recruiting is also critical to the success of attracting and retaining that talent. Changing wording in a job description only serves as an initial stage for diversity hiring. Continuous training and support from the top are also critical and are addressed as next step. Support from top executives and people leaders is essential to carry out effective hiring strategies. Unconscious bias training and training on diversity hiring can help people leaders identify personal biases and creating a more inclusive conversation.

Microsoft's new hiring pilot program for people with disabilities allows it to recruit from a new talent pool- a talent pool that is rich with skills. Microsoft restructured its recruiting process to include team projects, informal discussion with managers, mock interviews and coaching to fit the needs of candidates with autism and Asperger's syndrome.<sup>11</sup> The hiring managers also receive training about autism as a culture and within the workplace to help facilitate better interviews and lead to stronger communication throughout the process. Microsoft was able to bring in bright talents from the pool and the pilot program became a form of recruiting as it continuously receiving tremendous internal and external praise from its employees and applicants.

### Conclusion

By looking over specific examples, companies can be more aware of using language and restructuring its job posting to attract a more diverse pool of talents in the recruiting process. By using flexible wording, companies will receive a pool of talents with different years of experience and wide range of background. Employers should be flexible with not only wording, but also a growth mindset to look for a candidate who is willing to learn. By looking beyond of what they want and need, successful hiring managers' focus more candidate's potential in the long term and promise to provide a learning and challenging environment.

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## Appendix

### Appendix I: "Why Women Don't Apply for Jobs Unless They're 100% Qualified"

#### WHY DIDN'T YOU APPLY FOR THAT JOB?

Men and women give their reasons.



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